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The Commission on Disability and Employment Maine Jobs Council Summary of Work and Recommendations, 2007-2008

Maine State Workforce Investment Board

Maine Jobs Council

Maine Commission on Disability and Employment

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The Commission on Disability and Employment

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Envisioning a future in which all who want to work, can work...

Equality for people with disabilities is about having equal opportunities to live life to its fullest potential: to earn a good living, to follow a passion, to make a difference. We all must have the opportunity to attain and sustain employment, which is so central to our quality of life. What we do for work determines where we live, what we own, and whether or not we can save for retirement or send our children to college. Work also informs our sense of self and contributes to the social fabric of our lives.

I never had a job before. Thanks for giving me a chance!
Job Seeker

The Commission on Disability and Employment works toward the goal of full opportunity for people with disabilities who work or want to work. The Commission envisions a future in which people with disabilities have jobs that meet their economic and personal needs -- a future in which there is fair treatment of workers with disabilities and full support for their endeavors.

In this year's annual report, readers can learn about the Commission, the work it has supported, and its recommendations for actions that will bring us closer to this vision for the future.

The CDE: Fostering Opportunity for Workers with Disabilities

The Commission on Disability and Employment is made up of experts, advocates, and concerned citizens from the public and private sectors. Fifty-eight percent of its members are people who identify themselves as having a disability.

The Commission, which was created by state law, facilitates conversations, events, outreach, and advocacy among different organizations and community members. As a subcommittee of the Maine Jobs Council, the Commission works hard to integrate disability issues into the broader workforce development initiatives of the Council. The Commission promotes collaboration between the public and private sectors, and it serves as a central hub to the many entities with similar goals serving the needs of, and advocating for, a workforce inclusive of people with disabilities. The work of the Commission is guided by *Working Together: Maine's Strategic Plan to Maximize the Employment of People with Disabilities*—a long-term plan created in 2006 through collaboration and with the insight of many conversations with employers, service agency personnel, and people with disabilities. The plan can be found at: <http://choices.muskie.usm.maine.edu/plan/>.

An important job of the Commission is to report to the Governor, the legislature, and Maine's residents on the "state-of-the-state" of disability and employment in Maine and to make recommendations for improvement. For the Commission's progress report on strategic priority areas, visit: <http://www.state.me.us/labor/mjc/committees/disabilities/index.shtml>.

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Highlights from 2007-2008

Throughout Maine this year, much occurred to increase employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The Commission wishes to highlight four initiatives, which it actively supported in its advocacy and advisory capacity, that are particularly well aligned to the mission of achieving equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Engaging Employers

“Working Together,” an expanding group of Maine businesses, is reaching out to other employers to increase opportunities for workers with disabilities. Through events, meetings, job fairs, and a newsletter and website, the network is helping employers across Maine better understand what people with disabilities can offer them. Network members share information about accommodations, technology, legal issues, and employment services with employers who are interested or have concerns. Members include L.L. Bean, MEMIC, Stonewall Kitchen, and Time Warner Cable, among others.

Helping Young People with Disabilities Transition from School to Work

When young people with disabilities prepare to leave school, those who are able to actively take part in planning for this transition are more likely to be employed and are more likely to continue with their education and training. This critical involvement is actively promoted by *Mission Transition*, a collaborative effort by many departments, schools and transition groups, which was able to expand its offerings to include the whole state of Maine this year through the broadening of its financial support. Over 400 students in 44 high schools participated with employers, service providers, and families. Multiple workshops, many of which were led by young people, covered all areas of transition planning, such as employment, education, housing, health care, transportation, legal services, and community participation.

Improving CareerCenter Services

The Disability Program Navigator project is in its second year of working with CareerCenter staff, employers, and service providers to improve employment services for people with disabilities. There are four people serving as “navigators” in each of the Workforce Investment Areas, in addition to a lead navigator who works in Augusta. Navigators have been reaching out to communities across Maine to let them know about CareerCenter programs. They have also been training staff on assistive technology and legal issues. As awareness of the project has grown, so have requests for assistance from employers, service providers, and people with disabilities. Information and referral services, Social Security information, job searching strategies, and disability disclosure guidance are some examples of assistance provided by navigators.

Helping Social Security Beneficiaries Who Want to Return to Work

One of the biggest worries people receiving Social Security disability benefits have about returning to work is that doing so will jeopardize critical medical and/or cash benefits. As a result, there has been a large increase in the number of people contacting “Community Work Incentives Coordinators” (CWIC) at Maine Medical Center’s Department of Vocational Services. CWIC’s specialize in helping people understand exactly what will, and will not, happen to their benefits when they begin earning wages. Approximately 1,200 people

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received service this year. Between the first and second quarter of 2008, the number of people contacting CWICs for the first time increased over 20 percent.

Moving Forward: Recommendations to the Governor and Legislature

There are so many opportunities to open up job opportunities to people with disabilities in Maine. The Commission worked hard to narrow the many possible actions that could be taken to these four recommendations directed at Maine's Legislators and Governor. The Commission is strongly committed to working collaboratively for their achievement during the next year.

✓ Making the State Government a Model Employer of People with Disabilities

As one of Maine's largest employers, state government can serve as an example and a resource to other employers interested in hiring workers with disabilities. In 2006, the Governor signed an Executive Order that called for the state to better promote state jobs to people with disabilities. Later that year, the legislature passed a law that called for the state to review its hiring and advancement practices, increase accommodations efforts, and create a position to coordinate disability employment services.

Since that time, the Commission has been seeking the reinstatement of the position of "Disability Coordinator," a centralized position to coordinate the state's efforts to expand employment opportunities. Because of the rough financial times facing the state this past year, this position has not yet been created. **The Commission recommends that the Governor direct the Commissioner of the Department of Administrative and Financial Services to create this position within the Bureau of Human Resources by June 30, 2009.** This action would allow equitable distribution of the expense of this position across all state agencies and would allow for the person in the position to monitor disability and employment status reports that are mandated from all departments in January, 2009.

✓ Improving Information Flow between State Service Agencies and the Legislature

Maine needs a quality workforce and cannot afford to ignore the pool of employees with disabilities who comprise about 15 percent of Maine's population. In response to this need, Maine's service agencies have been working hard to help people who want to work find and sustain employment. However, the public, employers, and state decision-makers do not know what the actual results of the work of these various agencies have been. Have people with disabilities who received services from these agencies attained and kept employment? Consistent data across all agencies that is based on specific work outcomes would help answer this and other essential questions.

Towards this end, **the Commission recommends that the Governor direct the Commissioners of the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Labor to issue quarterly achievement reports**, beginning January 1, 2009, from all programs that provide employment placement and support services to people with

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disabilities. The reports must include the number of people working in competitive employment, wages earned, taxes paid, and information about the types of industries people are employed in.

Helping Those Who Are Transitioning from Benefits to Employment

As described in the “Highlights” section, there has been a big increase in the number of people seeking assistance from Community Work Incentives Coordinators at Maine Medical Center’s Department of Vocational Services. The people in these positions help those receiving Social Security disability benefits transition from public assistance to paid employment. Because of the addition of a new support waiver from the Office of Adults with Cognitive and Physical Disabilities, requests for benefits counseling will continue to increase. This year alone, inquiries were up over 20 percent.

Therefore, **the Commission recommends that the Governor direct the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services to contribute additional funds, beginning July 1, 2009, to the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance program** at Maine Medical Center. These additional funds are to be on behalf of the Office of Adults with Cognitive and Physical Disabilities and will support services for those who are enrolled in its support waiver program.

Integrating CareerCenter Service Delivery

People called “Disability Program Navigators” have been working with Maine’s CareerCenters, employers, and service providers to improve the efficacy of the CareerCenters’ services to workers with disabilities (see ‘Highlights’ section). Navigators provide training and information on topics such as assistive technology, legal issues, Social Security benefits, job searching, and disability disclosure decisions. These positions are currently in their second year of funding from a two-year grant.

The services provided by Navigators holds much promise for improving access to jobs for people with disabilities. The guidance they provide is bringing Maine closer to a day when all CareerCenter staff can fully serve the needs of job seekers with disabilities. For this reason, **the Commission recommends that the Governor direct the Commissioner of Labor to identify specific funding to extend the Navigator program beyond its initial two years.**

With Special Thanks

The Commission would like to thank the many people who participated in stakeholder discussions and other events throughout the year. This vital input from workers with disabilities, their supporters, and employers is what guides the work of the Commission as it goes forward.